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**Social networking and young adults' drinking practices:  
Innovative qualitative methods for health behavior research**

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The consumption of alcohol by young people has received considerable media and public attention, and continues to be a focus for researchers working in health-related fields. Heavy alcohol consumption is linked to many negative health outcomes, such as poisoning, violence and injury in the short term, and addiction, organ system damage, physical diseases and dementia in the longer term (Babor et al., 2010). While alcohol-related harms account for 4.6% of the global burden of disease, this affects younger people disproportionately (those aged 15-29 years; Rehm et al., 2009). Many young people are involved in normalised practices around heavy drinking which they view as pleasurable, involving having fun and being sociable in what has been termed the ‘culture of intoxication’ (Szmigin et al., 2008; McCreanor et al., 2008; Measham & Brain, 2005). Globally young people drink to intoxication more frequently than older drinkers (Babor et al., 2010), and this behavior is more common in countries with liberalised alcohol policies such as lower legal age to purchase alcohol, cheaper alcohol products, easier access to alcohol, and weak regulation of alcohol marketing (Measham & Brain, 2005).

Young people are also high users of new technologies, particularly social networking sites (SNS). Research demonstrates that young people are “living life online and in public via these sites” (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008, p.417) and they are integral to identity, relationships and lifestyles (Livingstone, 2008; Boyd, 2007). Facebook is the dominant site for social networking in the West, with over one billion active users who share almost 5 billion items every day (Wagner, 2013). New and more portable forms of technology (e.g. smartphones, tablets and laptops) are increasingly affordable and mean most young people have frequent (and often instantaneous) access to the internet. In this way SNS have become increasingly embedded as a continuous, seamless and routine part of young adults’ physical and social worlds (Dourish, Graham, Randall, Rouncefield, 2010; Niland et al., 2013; O’Carroll, 2013). Alcohol-related content on SNS is very common and shared amongst networks; young people also regularly and routinely upload photos to display their socialising,

friendships and drinking practices (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011). More broadly, they share, interact and engage with online content involving alcohol and intoxication in positive and humorous ways on Facebook, Myspace and YouTube (Morgan, Snelson & Elison-Bowers, 2010).

Research has identified high levels of alcohol-related content on university students' Facebook profiles. Studies show that over 85% of US male students' profiles examined displayed their alcohol consumption in positive ways (Egan & Moreno, 2011), while over 95% of Belgian student profiles examined displayed alcohol content that generated primarily positive peer responses (Beullens & Schepers, 2013). Australian university students have been found to use Facebook to display a 'drinker' identity which is highly valued and desirable (Ridout, Campbell & Ellis, 2012), while younger people's Bebo accounts in New Zealand were found to be replete with alcohol content and alcohol marketing messages (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010). Such online documentation has raised serious concerns about the creation of social drinking norms (e.g. Lefkowitz et al., 2012; Ridout et al., 2012), the normalisation of a culture of intoxication (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; McCreanor et al., 2013) and the consequent influences on drinking practices, particularly heavy consumption, among young people. Recent US research shows that alcohol content on SNS is viewed by teenagers (Moreno et al., 2009) and university students (Fournier, Hall, Ricke & Storey, 2013; Moreno, Grant, et al., 2012) as reflecting actual alcohol use by SNS users. It has also been linked to a greater willingness to consume alcohol among 13-15 year olds (Litt & Stock, 2011).

Prevalence of alcohol content online has also been associated with greater frequency of alcohol use among young adults (Stoddard et al, 2012; Huang et al., in press), while displays of heavy drinking have been associated with alcohol-related problems (Moreno, Christakis et al., 2012).

The quantitative methods employed in this research provide useful information regarding the prevalence of alcohol-related online content and its potential associations with drinking practices, however they cannot provide insight into why such material is posted by

users, what rewards it offers, the salience of social dimensions, or indeed what this content means to those engaging with it. Such studies also tend to focus on the potentially harmful effects of heavy drinking, paying less attention to the more positive meanings of the culture of intoxication for many young people, and its central role in their social lives (Day, 2010; Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2003; Griffin et al, 2009b). Currently, dominant media and health policy frameworks frequently consider young people's drinking practices (and associated social media use) as individual, risky behaviors (Brown & Gregg, 2012). Interventions are often based on social cognition models that focus on increasing people's knowledge of the outcomes of a particular behavior, assuming that 'correct' knowledge will lead to behavior change (e.g. educating young people about 'healthy drinking' will lead to a change in their drinking practices). This approach has been criticized for failing to be very successful at changing behavior (Mielewczyk & Willig, 2007), being conceptually problematic (Ogden, 2003; Mielewczyk & Willig, 2007), and portraying individuals as primarily rational beings whose behavior is devoid of social context or social meaning (Backett & Davison, 1995). Such an approach also overlooks the potential role of external factors in drinking practices, such as marketing, price and availability (see Casswell & Thamarangsi, 2009).

In contrast to the public health discourse of heavy alcohol consumption as risk, some research highlights the pleasurable aspects of such drinking practices. In this work drinking and drunkenness is usefully reconceptualised as "practice[s] embedded within social and cultural relations" (Jayne, Valentine & Holloway, 2010, p.540), and their meanings as a complex interplay of physiology, culture, social relationships, societal organisations, and position within the lifecourse (Backett & Davison, 1995; Lyons, Emslie & Hunt, 2014). Meanings and experiences of drinking vary across people of different socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, ages and genders (e.g. Peralta, 2007; Lyons & Willott, 2008). Yet they also transcend social groups, and demonstrate similarities across continents, nations and local regions. The practice of young adults' drinking to intoxication for pleasure and socialising

across many Western nations is a prime example (Gordon, Heime & MacAskill, 2012). Moreover such differences and continuities are bound up with “processes and practices of social distinction and constructions of identity and selfhood” (Jayne, Holloway & Valentine, 2006, p.465). In-depth qualitative methodologies have allowed researchers to explore the varied meanings that users attach to substance use and how these are created, reinforced and reproduced (Neale, Allen & Coombes, 2005). Such work demonstrates that young people’s drinking practices are firmly located in their social worlds (e.g. Griffin et al., 2009; Leyshon, 2008; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Measham, 2006; Smizgin et al., 2008; Waitt, Jessop & Gorman-Murray, 2011). Drinking practices are associated with release, pleasure and having fun with friends (e.g., Fry, 2011; Niland et al., 2013; Szmigin et al., 2011), and involve drunken adventures, caring for one another, and story-telling (e.g. Niland et al., 2013; Tutenges, 2012; de Visser, Wheeler, Abraham & Smith, 2013; Workman, 2001; Szmigin et al., 2011; Vander Ven, 2011). Furthermore, SNS are integrated into drinking practices such that they are routinely used to contact friends and arrange times and places to meet for drinking episodes (the consumption of alcohol over a period of time, usually an evening), including organising the alcohol to be purchased and pre-loading practices (Hebden, 2011; Tonks, 2012). SNS also allow users to provide content online while they are drinking and to share the fun involved in drinking stories via photos, comments and posts (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Hebden, 2011; Tonks, 2012). These activities reinforce the anticipation, excitement and pleasures of drinking practices (Brown & Gregg, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to outline an innovative qualitative methodology used to explore the role of SNS in young adults’ drinking cultures and alcohol consumption practices. SNS use and drinking alcohol are complex, meaning-laden social practices, and we sought to identify these meanings and their implications. We aimed to balance an awareness of the public health discourse of risk and the pervasive discourse of pleasure through which young people’s drinking is constituted, adopting a critical perspective, whilst acknowledging the potentially

serious health issues related to heavy drinking. This research was situated within a constructionist epistemology, which takes the view that all knowledge is constructed from the interactions “between human beings and their world” (Crotty, 1998, p.42) and therefore meanings “are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p.43). We employed multiple methods to access the meanings that young adults brought to drinking practices and SNS use across different social and cultural contexts. Multiple approaches allowed us to add depth, breadth, rigour, complexity and richness to this research endeavour (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2007). Below we describe our research design, including the three data collection stages we employed, the procedures and participants. We then use a brief illustrative example of one aspect of the data (focused on pleasure) to highlight important analytical insights that this methodology enabled. Finally, we consider ways in which young people’s meanings around drinking practices and SNS use have implications for both health psychology knowledge and health promotion strategies.

### **Research context and data collection methods**

Our research was situated in Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ), which has liberalised alcohol laws, an alcohol-based night-time economy, and a pervasive culture of intoxication, similar to the UK (McEwan, Campbell, & Swain, 2010). NZ society is made up of multiple ethnic strands that are interwoven in patterns of power relations established through the colonial history of the country (Spoonley & Pearson, 2004). To provide an in-depth investigation into our drinking cultures, it was important to specifically explore practices within the three major ethnic groups, Māori (indigenous people of NZ), Pasifika (people of Pacific Island descent), and Pākehā (people of European descent). These groups have different patterns of drinking shaped by their respective histories and particular social conditions. Māori are over-represented in hazardous drinking statistics, and tend to consume more in a drinking episode, although only

half this population drink, while Pasifika people consume less than others on average (NZ Ministry of Health, 2009, 2013) and have an even higher proportion of abstainers. Young people of all ethnicities in NZ use new technologies, particularly Facebook and the internet, in similar ways to users in countries such as Australia and Britain (Bell, Crothers, Gibson, & Smith, 2012). Below we outline the three stages of data collection involved in the research project. We sought and obtained approval for all stages of data collection from the university's human ethics committee.

### *Stage 1: Friendship group discussions*

Stage one involved collecting data through friendship group discussions. Alcohol consumption is a highly social activity for young people, based firmly on having fun together within friendship groups (Griffin et al., 2009; Lyons & Willott, 2008). As we aimed to obtain meanings of drinking practices within context, and gain insight into shared understandings of drinking behaviors and networking technologies, it was essential to focus on how meanings about drinking are made collaboratively among young adults who regularly go out and drink together. For young people in particular, friendship groups are also likely to form the basis of mediated social networking activities. The nature, form and meaning of friendship can vary across cultural groups (Spencer & Pahl, 2006), as do drinking practices, so we involved friendship groups with naturally occurring networks of friends within the three ethnic strands we were studying.

Friendship groups have pre-existing rapport and familiarity, allowing participants to relax and talk more freely in a social setting that approximates their everyday social experiences (Crossley, 2002). They also allow examination of social processes and interactions, and create an atmosphere where a greater range of responses may occur (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2010). However, asking young people to talk about their drinking and social networking within their groups of friends may make it difficult to voice



views that are different to those expressed within the group, especially for those who prefer not to drink heavily (e.g. see Piacentini & Banister, 2009), or who have experiences that their friends do not know about.

Friendship group participants were recruited using a mixture of snowball and convenience sampling techniques. Information on the study was shared among research team members' individual networks and beyond. Three female PhD researchers, from each of the three ethnicities (Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā), approached workplaces, education institutions, community organisations, and posted information about the study on their own Facebook pages, seeking to recruit participants of their own ethnicity aged between 18-25 years. Interested potential participants asked 3-6 of their friends to take part in a group discussion, most of whom were the same ethnicity as the organising participant. As groups formed, all members were given an information sheet outlining the procedures involved and the topics that would be discussed, such as friendships, use of social technologies, leisure time and drinking activities. Discussions were facilitated by the PhD researchers. They were held in workplaces, homes, or university rooms and lasted between 60-120 minutes. Upon arrival, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and assured of anonymity in any research dissemination. All participants signed a consent form, granting permission to audio and video-record the discussion and agreeing to keep the information shared confidential. Snacks and non-alcoholic drinks were provided prior to discussions to create a comfortable, relaxed setting and discussions tended to be quite lively as participants talked about and shared their experiences together.

Thirty-four friendship focus group discussions were conducted with 141 participants aged 18-25 years ( $M=20.24$  ;  $SD=2.11$ ). They included 80 female participants (56.7%), 57 male participants (40.4%), and 4 Fa'afafine (2.8%), a third gender categorisation used in Pasifika cultures for people born male but whose spirit is female (a gender role that is not captured by any other term). The gender composition of the groups was determined by the

organising participant through their choice of friends to invite. Nine groups were all female, six all male, and 19 consisted of both males and females. Twelve of the groups consisted of predominantly Pākehā participants, 12 consisted of predominantly Māori participants, and 10 included predominantly Pasifika participants. To create a rich and varied dataset within each ethnic strand, groups were recruited in different geographic locations, workplaces and education institutions. This provided diversity across the groups in terms of location, socioeconomic status (from poor working class through to wealthy), occupations (including employed and unemployed young people, students and young professionals) and relationship and parent status (single, partnered, and single parents). Thus differences existed between groups but within groups participants were relatively similar to one another in terms of background and occupation.

### *Stage 2: Individual interviews with internet-enabled laptop*

In stage two the three female researchers undertook individual interviews, again with participants of their own ethnicity, to provide space to voice views that may have sat outside friendship group norms and gain more nuanced insights into social networking and drinking practices. The interviews involved access to an internet-enabled laptop, allowing the participant to navigate to show relevant or favoured sites, texts, images, and videos. We were particularly interested in participants' own social networking profiles and their posted stories, photos, videos, and friendship networks, especially those involving alcohol and drinking episodes. A primary feature of Facebook is photo-sharing with over 250 billion photos uploaded onto this site, and approximately 350 million photos added daily (Smith, 2014). Preliminary research suggests that the images of drinking, and the representation of drinking behavior, are most influential in affecting peer social norms (Stoddard et al., 2012). Visual media play a key role in social activities, interactions, and identity negotiations (Reavey & Johnston, 2008; Pink, 2007), thus by inviting participants to show and talk about their social

networking practices we were able to gain insight into these processes in a more vivid manner than would otherwise be possible.

Participants from stage one were invited to take part in stage two. Those who were interested were given study details, had any questions answered, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in any written reports. Interviews were conducted in university rooms or participants' homes. They began with an outline of the research topic and participants signed consent forms agreeing to the video and online screen recording (which was described and demonstrated). It was made clear that information from their Facebook pages shared during the interview would be anonymised for any research dissemination activities, while information from other people's Facebook pages (sometimes accessed when participants clicked on photos they were tagged in, or wanted to show particular material) would not be used in any form of dissemination as the owners of these pages had not consented to the use of this material. Participants all had Facebook profiles and were asked to show and discuss their online activities. They logged on to their Facebook accounts on the web-enabled laptop, showed and talked about their Facebook pages, photos, any material related to their drinking practices or alcohol, while discussing ways in which they used SNS and engaged in online environments. Digital navigation capture software stored all online activity, while synchronous video recorded researcher questions, participant explanations of content, and non-verbal communications, providing a data stream which documented essential aspects of participants' online worlds. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were open and flexible and led by the participants as far as possible.

Twenty-three young adults aged from 18-25 years ( $M= 20.96$ ;  $SD=2.35$ ) took part in the one-on-one interviews (18 from stage one), including 15 females, seven males, and one Fa'afafine. Seven were Pākehā; eight were Māori and eight were Pasifika. Five participants (2 Māori and 3 Pasifika) had not taken part in the stage one discussion groups, but had heard

about the research from friends or networks, and had volunteered to take part in this second stage.

### *Stage 3: Online material*

In order to adequately analyse and interpret the data collected in stages 1 and 2, we needed to explore and contextualise the online worlds participants were engaged in. In stage 3 we sought to gain an overview of the sites and materials that captured and engaged participants' time and attention. In this stage we began by collating all the web-based content regarding alcohol and drinking mentioned or shown by participants in the first two stages. To add breadth and depth to this database we supplemented it through weekly searches by project research assistants across a 12-month period. Popular alcohol-related (including brand) websites identified by participants in stages 1 and 2 were followed, while Google alerts and search engines were used to identify sites concerning alcohol consumption, intoxication, Facebook, social networking, celebrities and youth culture. These strategies provided a database of 487 websites (with links and screen captures) mostly sourced from the friendship group discussions (275), then from the individual interviews (131), and the remainder from the efforts of research assistants (81). Facebook was the most frequently mentioned website by both group and individual interview participants (64% and 63% respectively), followed by other SNS (12% and 13% respectively) including YouTube and Bebo. When employed alongside other types of data such as interviews, analyses of these materials provide detailed insights (Murthy, 2008) and broader contextual understandings (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

### **Data management and analytic techniques**

These data collection techniques generated a range of rich, detailed, complex data, including transcripts, video, online browsing activity/history, online audio, visual and textual material.

They allowed us to identify uses of new media technologies, their relevance for drinking practices, and their embeddedness in young adults' everyday lives (Niland et al., 2013; O'Carroll, 2013). They also enabled us to engage with multimodality, the dynamic interactions among text, speech, image, video, photos, and interactivity (Kress, 2010), to investigate how young adults' drinking behaviors play out in the context of online technologies.

The discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participant names were changed to pseudonyms and any identifying features were also removed from transcripts (e.g. place names, workplaces). For the individual interviews, Transana software was employed to collate three strands of data, namely the video recording, transcript, and screen recording, thus providing a 'multimodal' dataset. These strands were time-synchronised and enabled the researchers to simultaneously read what was being said (transcript), alongside viewing and hearing the participant (visual and audio) and watching the screen navigation record. Transana is a qualitative software programme designed to "facilitate the transcription, analysis and management of digital video or audio data" (Mavrikis & Geraniou, 2011, p.246).

We employed multiple analytic methods to investigate the various datasets. Transcripts of friendship group discussions and individual interviews were subject to both social constructionist-informed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Foucauldian discourse analyses (Willig, 2001). Thematic analysis allowed us to categorise the friendship discussion transcripts into broad topic areas, and identify patterns and variations across the groups. This process also allowed more manageable segments of data to be selected and analysed in finer detail, using a discursive approach in which we interrogated what was being constructed in the text, what the functions of such a construction were, which meanings were foregrounded and which were closed-off, and how meanings related to broader cultural and social 'discourses' available to participants. We looked within and across groups, and identified similarities and differences, as well as contradictions and complexities. Throughout this process we regularly engaged in team discussions with members from a range of disciplinary backgrounds

(psychology, media studies, cultural studies, public health, criminology and Māori and Pasifika research) which helped to theorise the data in ways that were informed by diverse perspectives.

A similar process was undertaken with the individual interviews, although here the transcripts were analysed alongside screen capture data. It was a time-consuming process and team discussions and sharing of analytic insights were essential. While new technologies have enabled new forms of discourse and discourse analysis (Scollon & LeVine, 2004), we developed our own conceptualisations for analysing multimodal discourse in this context based on previous research on the complexity of web pages, websites, web users and web genres (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress, 2010) and the variety of interwoven interactions that people engage in simultaneously (Norris, 2004). We continued to focus on what participants said about their online activity and Facebook content, and thus emphasised analysis of the transcripts in combination with the web-based data. In this way we explored the meanings that participants made of the online content and the functions such meaning-making served.

Similarly, we did not analyse the websites that were collected as part of the stage 3 material separately, but rather used these to inform our understandings and analyses of participants' own constructions about their drinking practices and SNS in the discussions and interviews. We used the stage 3 database to access websites, become experienced with navigating around them, in some cases interacting with them and immersing ourselves in the content. In this way we were able to gain first-hand insight into the processes by which young adults engage with, and are engaged by, such online material. This may be considered a version of online ethnography, demonstrating the ways that people engage with new technologies, websites and online activities in their everyday lives (van Doorn, 2013).

### **A brief illustrative example: Pleasure as central but differentiated**

Our analyses showed that friendship group participants constructed pleasure, enjoyment and solidarity as central to their drinking and social networking practices. However, this centrality of pleasure was unsettled in the individual interviews and was also differentiated by ethnicity, gender and social class across the datasets. The stage three web-based material, considered alongside young people's talk within both friendship groups and individual interviews, demonstrated the commercial nature of social networking sites and the deep penetration of alcohol marketing into young people's drinking cultures. This material reinforced pleasure as central to drinking cultures and young people's drinking and SNS practices.

*The pleasures of drinking with friends and sharing this behavior online: Differences across datasets and social groups*

Friendship group participants co-constructed drinking heavily as an intensely social and pleasurable activity, in line with previous research (e.g. Fry, 2011). They discussed how Facebook offered many opportunities to extend and enhance the pleasures of heavy social drinking, especially through the pervasive activity of uploading photos of drinking episodes, which were shared and commented on across friendship networks. Participants attached high value to drinking photos, which led to ongoing interactions, comments and storytelling both on and offline for days, weeks and even months following a drinking episode, as the following excerpt shows:

Dylan: I think the reason why we have the drinking photos is because it makes your life like more fun, so you're always doing something (...)

Lo: It's memories as well and all your friends are out together on the piss and you do have fun. So you take photos and some of them will be funny photos, and you'll just look at them and crack up and go oh my gosh, do you remember when you were that wasted? [laughing]

Here Dylan and Lo construct drinking practices as centrally about “fun”, and this fun is extended by sharing drinking photos on Facebook. As Dylan notes, the drinking photos work to demonstrate that “your life” (not just one aspect of it) is “more fun”, suggesting that the uploading (and tagging) of drinking photos contributes to a particular identity performance in which drinking alcohol is linked to a life involving fun and pleasure. Dylan also comments that drinking photos demonstrate (to online audiences) that “you’re always doing something”, implying that an undesirable online identity is one where you are inactive. Lo describes how the drinking photos provide memories about socialising with friends, and the humour that arises (later on) from being “that wasted”. In this way drinking photos are shared within the groups using humour and function to provide subsequent social entertainment which reinforces friendship bonds, particularly with the friends who were out drinking, and reasserts the “fun” of drinking heavily together.

In contrast, individual interview participants’ constructed the meanings of their Facebook drinking photos in more complex and contradictory ways. Almost always, their Facebook drinking photos portrayed groups of friends out socialising, smiling, and frequently looking glamorous and happy. Nevertheless, some of these photos prompted accounts by participants that were inconsistent with a face reading of the photos, such as accounts of accidents, violence, injury, and conflicts with friends due to intoxicated behavior. For example, Sarah showed a photo of herself dressed nicely standing at the front of a boat where she was attending a party, and described how soon after the photo was taken she fell down the stairs on the boat. Alexander showed some photos of himself at a party laughing with his friends, but then described how “the party was over and some guy was bored so he just came up and punched me in the face”. These instances disrupt the dominant construction of drinking as all about pleasure. They also demonstrate that the meanings an outsider reads off Facebook photos are not necessarily the same meanings that the owner, or their friends, attach to those same



photos.

Additionally, while social networking, and photo-sharing particularly, were highly valued in the friendship group discussions, individual interview participants complicated this notion by describing their (gendered) concerns regarding the sheer amount of time and effort that was required in creating and maintaining appropriate identity displays on Facebook. This work, especially by the young women, involved uploading photos, being visible and attentive in SNS, making immediate and ‘live’ responses to friends’ comments and messages, and ensuring their online ‘drinking’ identity displayed drinking and having fun, but without appearing ‘too’ drunk or looking ‘tragic’ or unattractive.

Juxtaposing the findings from the varying datasets provides insights into the complexities and tensions involved in drinking practices, and the ‘airbrushing’ of online drinking cultures (Niland et al., 2014). Facebook photos did not display injuries, fights, or the remainder of a night spent crying (with or without) friends. Similarly, the web-based material in stage three did not contain negative images, stories, or accounts, but constructed drinking (heavily) positively as about enjoyment, pleasure, humour, fun and importantly, friendship. These complexities matter. Systematically editing out negative drinking experiences leaves desirable online identity performances around alcohol consumption characterised by representations of fun, pleasure and friendship. In SNS young people can show that their “life” is exciting and enjoyable and that they are popular and sociable. Uncritical readings of such online representations would suggest that drinking alcohol is an important component of positive, happy lifestyles and help to explain the associations that have been found in existing literature between online alcohol content and increased drinking.

The pleasures involved in socialising with alcohol were apparent across all ethnicity groups, genders and social classes, and the discourses participants drew on in their friendship discussions appeared to be similar across both same and mixed-sex groups. However, there were differences in how some groups engaged with sharing their drinking practices and photos

on Facebook. Pākehā (particularly male) participants constructed such activities as routine but exciting, allowing them to share the fun they were having (or had had) with their online networks. In contrast, Māori and Pasifika (particularly female) participants constructed the posting of (or being in) drinking photos online in more cautious and wary terms. Some described having to be careful throughout a night of drinking to avoid people with cameras or to ensure they did not have an alcoholic drink when photos were taken. In this way they constructed their drinking practices as involving a great deal more self-management than others. For example, in the context of a group discussion about sharing drinking activities online, one Pasifika participant stated:

Kaleti: It limits yourself. You can't really be yourself on Facebook unless you kinda don't care where you will get like, where it will like backfire on you. I guess it is up to you, but I kinda feel I can't trust Facebook

Pasifika GP1; 4 males

Such awareness detracted from the enjoyment of both drinking and online photo posting and interactions. Young people on government benefits were also wary of potential surveillance of their online drinking displays. Thus the research design, to explicitly include a range of voices across the social and cultural sphere, highlighted how the pleasures associated with drinking and social networking practices were dependent upon participants' ethnicity, social class and gender (although a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper).

### *The commercial environment: Using and reinforcing the notion of 'pleasure'*

Social media use is intimately tied to identity (van Dijck, 2013), and online content serves as an identity display, providing a statement about who the user is (Coyne, Padilla-Walker & Howard, 2013). Alcohol companies use social media to market their products to young people in highly sophisticated ways that serve to enhance these identity displays. Friendship group and

interview participants described actively engaging with online alcohol marketing initiatives, which constructed drinking as solely about having fun and socializing with friends.

Discussions with many of the interview participants about their Facebook activity highlighted that alcohol brands and pages were an integral part of their online identities, enabling them to present tastes and preferences, and facilitating social interaction through sharing amusing alcohol-related content generated by alcohol companies.

The online material we gathered in stage three demonstrated that bars and clubs were also making active use of social media marketing and contributing to the specific types of sociable pleasures that participants themselves emphasised, such as posting drinking photos online. Many bars and clubs now provide this ‘service’ for their patrons so they do not have to spend time taking photos while they are out socialising and drinking. The importance of linking into an integrated social media network where companies can ‘connect’ to users was apparent here. For example, one bar website informed viewers that websites are “a thing of the past” and they must connect via social media, as shown in Figure 1. The business builds ongoing interactive links with patrons, in ways that draw on the pleasures of young adults’ online drinking cultures and drinking practices, enabling targeted real-time alcohol promotions.

Alcohol marketing also employs key mechanisms in Facebook to mimic the pleasures involved in Facebook friend relationships, appearing in participants’ group links, news feeds and status updates in the same manner that friends’ postings do. Alcohol product pages and their promotions on Facebook were not necessarily viewed as advertising by participants, as Alex describes below:

Trish: Do you see any alcohol advertising online? (...)

Alex: I never see it online bro. Not on Facebook or anything. I always just see it on a billboard

Trish: Have you seen any Facebook profiles, like Tui or Cruiser or? (...)

Alex: Yeah I have seen that. You can ‘like’ them. And then oh it’ll just be on

Facebook so often you'll come across a friend in the notification or the update his profile update it'll just say [name] likes 42 Below New Zealand vodka and you click on it and it'll be like a description of what it's about. Stuff like that.

What flavours. Where you can get it from.

Pakeha GP7; 3 males

Here Alex constructs alcohol product information and related pages as relatively mundane and routine through his repeated use of the minimising word “just”, and dismisses it as explicit advertising due to the way it reaches him through his friend networks and in newsfeeds. In this way alcohol advertising infiltrates into naturalised, pleasurable, and ongoing interaction that is passed around peer networks. These SNS activities are fundamental for young adults as they contribute to identity construction processes and the development and maintenance of friendships. Yet they also mean that within this context it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is marketing and what is not (see also Nicholls, 2012).

## **Conclusions**

The methodology employed in this research allowed valuable insights into young adults' drinking practices and SNS. Using multiple lenses, generating multimodal datasets, and juxtaposing web-based data with participants' talk about their drinking and SNS use within discussion groups and individual interviews, provides knowledge that could not be obtained with more traditional methods or a single form of data collection. Our brief illustrative example demonstrated this in relation to the pleasures of drinking and SNS use, which functioned to maintain and reinforce valued friendship relationships and desired online identity performances. However, while participants drew on powerful discourses around sociability, fun and pleasure to describe both their drinking practices and social media use, this was only apparent in some contexts and played out differently across the sample. Thus the pleasures,

pains and risks involved in these practices were unevenly distributed systematically across gender, class and ethnicity. These findings suggest tentative potentials for ways to intervene to disrupt co-constructed and positively-edited accounts of heavy alcohol consumption, so that the pleasures *as well as* the tensions and problems are able to be brought into view. This might involve, for example, highlighting those concerns that young people express outside their friendship groups, the airbrushed nature of online profiles, and the amount of time and effort required to portray a desirable online drinking identity and be visible on these networks.

More broadly, we argue that the social constructionist orientation of the current research allowed us to identify the contextualised meanings that participants bring to these aspects of their social world, some of the functions they serve in terms of identity construction and performance, as well as the power structures and vested interests involved. Our approach contributes to both theoretical development and practical strategies for managing heavy drinking practices. For example, our findings show that alcohol marketing is deeply embedded in social networks, and is actively drawn upon by young adults, shared and re-shared, blurring distinctions between ‘user’ and ‘commercial’ content. This makes it very difficult to regulate, as it is not simply about controlling the content of online marketing, but critically about the ways in which the materials are taken up and used in novel and significant ways by young adults. Such findings are highly relevant for public health campaigns, which have to operate in an environment where opposing commercial ‘messages’ are thoroughly integrated into young adults’ everyday activities. Globalising youth consumption practices (Babor et al, 2010, Gordon et al, 2012) involving social media urge young people to drink to intoxication and celebrate this consumption online, while they are simultaneously urged to drink responsibly and rationally in public health messages.

There have been calls for online social networks to provide a platform for behavior change health interventions (Buis, 2011; Park & Calamaro, 2013) and prevention programs to reduce alcohol consumption in young people (e.g. Stoddard et al., 2012). Using SNS in health

promotion is appealing because messages can be sent quickly to vast audiences, through peer networks, and with user-participation (Kass-Hout & Alhinnawi, 2013; Loss, Lindacher & Curbach, in press). However, these sites are widely employed to market products that are damaging to health (Loss et al., in press), and they reinforce both everyday and binge drinking practices, normalising and encouraging a culture of intoxication (McCreanor et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2012). Our research suggests we should be cautious in using SNS as a tool for disseminating health promotion messages regarding drinking practices, given the highly valued nature of drinking stories and content online, and the many individual and social benefits that engaging with peer-generated alcohol content and marketing provide for young adults. It may be beneficial to lay bare the commercial context in which young people's drinking practices play out online. These include the ways in which owners of SNS platforms (such as Facebook) use behavioral data as valuable resources that they collect and sell without users' knowledge (van Dijck, 2013); these data are exploited by multinational alcohol companies to increase consumption and raise profits. Other approaches might be to convince companies who own the sites to improve health by altering this marketing environment, or to expand regulation of alcohol marketing to include social media.

In conclusion, flexible, innovative and creative qualitative methodologies, drawing on a range of methods and datasets, can provide more comprehensive understandings of the complex and situated ways in which people engage with behaviors related to their health in their everyday lives (Chamberlain, 2013). Qualitative methods are labor intensive and demanding of resources at all stages (from data collection, through to processing, coding and analysing; Neale et al., 2005) and sometimes generate thorny ethical issues that require careful consideration. However, they also create opportunities for novel insights and unexpected discoveries. We need to learn more about the wider social and cultural dimensions that are involved in young people's drinking practices, by using research approaches that are both sensitive to everyday experiences and also the power structures that frame these experiences

(Wilson, 2006). The knowledge generated by such approaches will contribute to designing effective health policy and health promotion strategies to engage with young people and act as catalysts for change.

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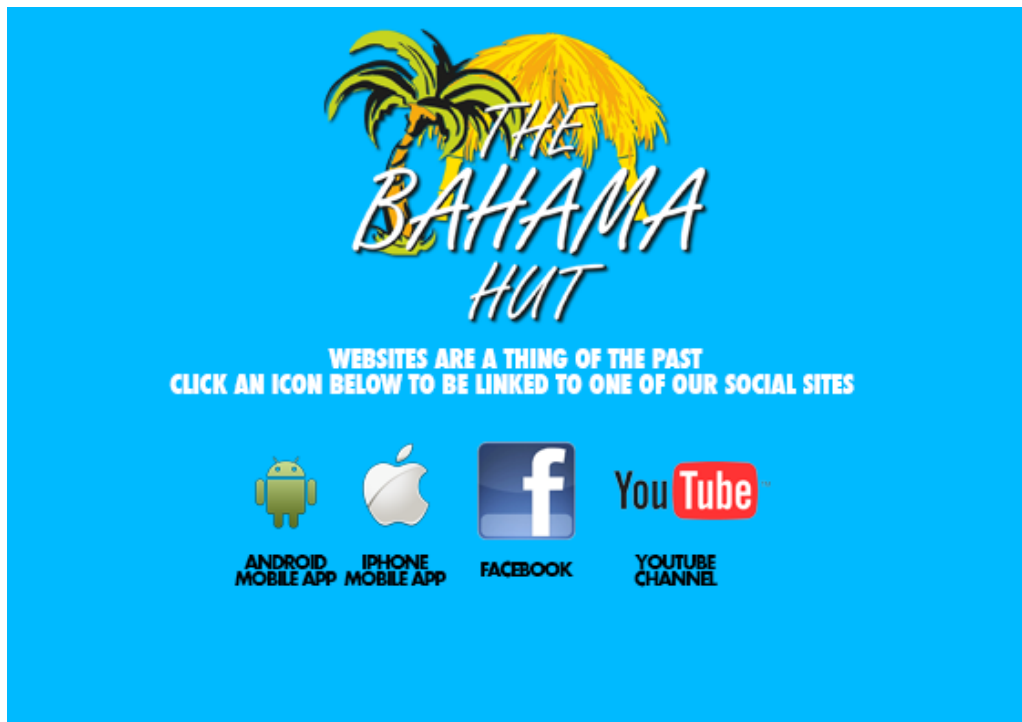


Figure 1: The Bahama Hut website